Europeanization of co-determination: the experience of employee representatives in international boards of European Companies (SE)

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The European Company (Societas Europaea, or SE) legislation has introduced the possibility to internationalize the composition of employee representation on company boards. This Europeanization of employee representation leads to both opportunities and challenges.

On one hand, board-level employee representation might be spread to countries where no such regulation exists in the domestic industrial relations system. Thus, the SE legislation opens up new possibilities for workers' representation in multinational companies. On the other hand, this also brings new challenges to employee representation. Employee representatives from different countries have to deal with different languages and different national ideas of employee representation leading to divergent expectations and perceptions and, thus, increasing the need for coordination. Very little is known about the experience of employee representatives in international boards of European Companies. Therefore, it remains largely unexplored in which way new channels for workers' representation actually emerge and how actors deal with those challenges in practice.

Against this backdrop, the paper explores the experience of employee representatives in international boards of European Companies. We examine how board-level representatives coming from divergent national backgrounds perceive their representative role and analyze the processes of interaction between 'home' and 'foreign' board-level employee representatives in internationalized boards of SEs. We also explore how a common understanding is built up and the ways in which board-level employee representatives influence decision-making within the companies.

The paper is part of an ETUI-led research project. The research draws on semi-structured interviews with board-level employee representatives in ten SEs, mostly headquartered in Germany. The ten company cases selected for this study all display board-level employee delegates from at least three countries. Interviews were conducted with German and non-German employee representatives.